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AUTHOR Clark, John L. D.
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ABSTRACT

If sociolinguistics involves the specification and analysis of sociological, interpersonal, and pragmatic variables at issue in given language-use situations, and discourse anaysis is the observation and analysis of both linguistic and paralinguistic features of speech events within these situations, there are at least three areas in these combined fields crucial to the appropriate conduct and interpretation of interview-based testing. These include: (1) the physical setting, (2) the identity and characteristics of the interlocutors, and (3) the intended outcome of the communication, both topical and affective. In each of these areas, the oral proficiency interview in its present form has varying degrees of congruence with the real-life comunication situation. In some cases, specific improvements in the interviewing and/or rating process can be suggested. In others, it is possible at present only to identify the discrepancies as a basis for further research and development. For example, with regard to the communication setting, although it is impossible to reproduce in the interview a large variety of surroundings, the interpretive range of the interview can be broadened by studies comparing oral interview performance with real-world performance and by use of relevant "props" important to the communication. Role-playing exercises can be used to incorporate a wider variety of interlocutors. However, the issue of communication outcome is more complex and requires further study before it will be resolved in the oral interview process. (MSE)

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Some Sociolinguistic and Discourse Analysis Considerations in Oral Proficiency Interviewing

John L. D. Clark

Center for Applied Linguistics

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My purpose in the few moments available this afternoon is to outline some of the implications that sociolinguistic and discourse analytic approaches to the examination of spoken language performance would appear to have for the further development, administration, and interpretation of the oral proficiency interview.

If sociolinguistics is viewed as involving the specification and analysis of sociological, interpersonal, and pragmatic variables at issue in given language-use situations; and discourse analysis, as the observation and analysis of both linguistic and paralinguistic features of speech events as they take place within these situations, it would appear that there are at least three major areas addressed in these combined fields that are crucial to the appropriate conduct and interpretation of interview-based testing. These are: (1) the physical setting in which a given speech event takes place; (2) the identity and characteristics of the interlocutors involved; and (3) the intended outcome of the communication, in terms of both the topical information conveyed and the affective burden of the communication. I would like, over the next few minutes, to expand somewhat on each of these aspects and to indicate the degree of congruence or lack of congruence which the oral proficiency interview in its present form would appear to have vis-à-vis the "real-life" communication situation in each instance. In some cases, specific improvements in the interviewing and/or rating process (or at least an approach to introducing such improvements) can be suggested; in others, it will be possible at this point only to identify the discrepancies, with the hope that further research and practical developments will permit their eventual resolution.

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First, with regard to communication setting, it may be considered for all practical purposes impossible effectively to reproduce, within the interview framework, the large variety of physical surroundings (e.g., restaurant, busy train station, etc.) in which real-life communication takes place, and which may be presumed to have at least some, and in many instances a substantial, effect on the nature and outcome of a given communicative activity. For example, when seventeen people are behind the non-native speaker of German in line at the ticket window, the real world does not permit the speaker the luxury of laboriously paraphrasing or acting out the need for a second class round trip ticket to Bonn. Communicating with the waiter in a crowded and noisy Oktoberfest beer hall represents an appreciably different linguistic task from that involved in obtaining suitable refreshments in a quieter and more leisurely setting. In these and a vast number of other instances, short of transporting the interviewer and interviewee into the train station, beer hall, or other physical setting at issue (or conceivably, making use of highly sophisticated audiovisual techniques such as panoramic sound-image projection screens) it is not realistically possible to duplicate or even closely approximate the "real-life" communication setting within the interview itself.

It would seem both prudent and advisable, at the current stage of development of the oral interview, to openly acknowledge the situational constraints involved, and to state quite candidly that the interview is not intended to reflect, or to provide a predictive measure of, those kinds of communication that take place in "non-neutral" surroundings, i.e., surroundings whose physical attributes may themselves be considered to play an appreciable role in the nature and success of the communication. Such "non-neutral" surroundings include those containing physical objects highly relevant to the intended communication

(for example, the piping complex in a factory boiler room, when the communicative intent is to teach the new apprentice which valves to turn at particular times); as well as settings that place temporal or psychological burdens on the interlocutor and/or require communication under difficult acoustic or other adverse physical conditions.

There would appear to be two approaches to broadening the interpretive range of the interview beyond language performance in completely "neutral" physical settings. One approach, discussed in some detail at the 1980 Round Table preconference (Clark 1980), would be to carry out a series of experimental studies in which examinee language performance in a variety of "real-world" settings could be observed and evaluated, with subsequent direct comparison to performance on the oral interview. A second, complementary approach would be to distinguish between, on the one hand, those physical features of a given setting that are integral to or highly important for appropriate communication in that setting and, on the other, "background" features that provide greater situational ambience and realism but may be considered to have little or no bearing on the communication activity per se. For example, in the restaurant context, a constantly available and communicatively highly relevant physical item is, of course, the menu itself; and a relatively nonproficient examinee actually in this setting might communicate perfectly adequately by simply pointing to selected items on the menu, with or without such spoken accompaniments as "je veux ça et ça et ça." In testing at the "survival" level and perhaps even slightly above, it may be worth considering, as a logical and face-valid enhancement of the interviewing process, the use of menus, train schedules and other communicatively-relevant objects that are routinely present in the real-life settings in question. On the other hand, it would not appear at all necessary to concern oneself with incorporating any of the plethora of noncritical

items that might be present in a given communication setting. For example, in attempting to provide "restaurant" conditions for interviewing purposes, reproducing a wall full of photographs of famous-personality diners would be of little conceivable value from a language-measurement perspective.

With regard to the interlocutors involved in the interview and the extent to which both they and their communicative purposes are able to reflect real-life speech situations, it must be acknowledged that in the real-life setting, the number and nature of possible interlocutors is virtually infinite. For example, even the relatively circumscribed real-life examinee role of "year-abroad student" would imply potential speaking encounters with--in addition to the waiters and ticket vendors previously mentioned—classmates at joint study sessions and in post-study café conversations, academic professors after class and during an occasional office appointment, and so forth. At least in its "straight conversation" mode, the oral proficiency interview can encompass only a restricted subset of possible interlocutor/speech-situation combinations and, by the same token, can directly reflect only a relatively small (albeit quite important) portion of the sociolinguistic spectrum at issue in real-life communication.

Specifically, it would appear that the types of speech situations that can be at least reasonably well approximated during the interview are those in which the interlocutors (1) are not prior acquaintances; (2) do not share a common specialization or technical area; (3) are of approximately equal social status; and (4) are at about the same general educational level. In this regard, it is not at all surprising that the kinds of topics characteristically addressed in the interview—biographical information, current work or study activities, hobbies and other pastimes, vacation plans, etc.--are in fact those discourse areas typically broached in polite social conversation between relative strangers.

Not at all readily incorporated in the "conversational" interview are speaking situations whose sociolinguistic characteristics differ appreciably from those involved in polite, relatively formal, social conversation, and including, for example, situations in which (1) there is a high level of shared knowledge about a particular subject area (as among work colleagues in a particular job setting); (2) other than neutral tone or affect is to be conveyed (for example, arguing, complaining, demanding, etc.); or (3) the examinee is presumed to have a higher social status than, or be in functional authority over, the examiner. These and other interlocutor-related considerations have crucial implications for the communicative strategies employed in the real-life setting, including selection of lexicon, affective tone/intonation adopted, care and precision of pronunciation, use of of nonverbal cues, and a variety of other aspects of the speech event as it is ultimately manifested.

The "interpreting situation" exercise often carried out as part of the traditional FSI interview represents one approach to having both the examiner and examinee project themselves into sociolinguistic contexts other than "polite social conversation." However, this technique departs from situational realism in a number of respects, including the fact that the examinee is not speaking on his or her own behalf but is simply the spokesperson for one of the interlocutors, who "calls the shots" with respect to both the detailed informational content of the message ("Please tell him that I've run out of gas") and any affective aspects involved ("I'm in a terrible hurry because I'm due for a job interview in thirty minutes"). Whether or not an examinee who exhibits satisfactory competence in this or other interpreting situations would be capable of carrying out similar communicative activities independently of the "over-the-shoulder" assistance provided by the interviewer is presently unknown. A further drawback of the interpreting task as a measure of direct conversation is that it elicits

third-person narration on the part of the exminee ("This person says that he has run out of gas...") rather than the first-person discourse at issue in examinee-initiated conversation.

A more suitable, although still less than completely realistic, approach to incorporating a wider variety of interlocutor/speech situations within the interview involves the use of role-playing exercises such as those developed by Fraser, Rintell, and Walters (1980). In this technique, the examinee is given detailed written information (in the native language) about the sex, age, social status, and other characteristics of the presumptive interlocutor with whom the examinee is to converse, and equally precise information concerning the specific communicative task to be carried out. An example is as follows:

> You have made an appointment to have lunch at noon on the next Monday with an older business acquaintance whom you do not know well. On that day, you are very busy and completely forget about the date until 12:30. You hurriedly find a taxi and rush to the restaurant to find your luncheon partner waiting outside for you since they would not let him inside until you arrived. What would you say?

Situations of this general type, cued by printed English instructions that the examinee can study carefully ahead of time, have been used in tester training workshops both at the Defense Language Institute (DLI) and in various ACTFL/ETS workshop settings, and appear to represent a promising elicitation technique. Such an approach, however, places an even greater burden on the interviewer, who, beyond fulfilling all of his or her other interview-related responsibilities, must in addition serve as a realistic stand-in for whatever particular interlocutor has been defined in the role-play specification (e.g.,

"stood-up older business acquaintance"). In that capacity, the interviewer must deliver an acting performance that duplicates or at least closely approximates both the linguistic and extralinguistic behaviors that would be at issue in the real-life interlocutor/situational context involved.

Needless to say, wide variation in "role-playing ability" may be expected among language instructors or others involved in interviewing activities, and if role-play is to become an important and regular component of the interviewing process, close attention will need to be given, in the first instance, to selecting for interviewer training only those persons who demonstrate at least a certain degree of aptitude in this regard, and, in the second, to incorporating into the training process explicit and effective instruction in role-playing techniques.

The identification of types of roles appropriate for examinees at different levels on the interview scale and/or for examinees in different functional categories of anticipated real-life language use requirements (for example, Peace Corps volunteers headed for service in Central American villages; FSI graduates taking consular posts in Western Europe) will be an extremely challenging undertaking from both linguistic and administrative perspectives. Individualized assessments based on such highly detailed sociolinguistic specifications as those developed by Munby (1978) and B. Carroll (1980) are, in all probability, not viable options within the time and staff availabililty constraints of most operational interviewing programs. A more productive strategy would appear to be that of establishing a relatively limited number of what might be called "situational recipes," that is, relatively broad speaker/communicative intent descriptions, each specifying particular linguistic functions to be carried out within given social settings, but general enough to permit a variety of role-play realizations. For example, two such recipes might be "complaining politely

to a superior about..." and "persuading a colleague to...." Without intending to anticipate the outcome of the analytic work that would be required to develop a reasonably comprehensive but at the same time administratively managable inventory of "situational recipes," it might be envisioned that some two dozen, or perhaps thirty, such statements would be adequate to encompass the majority of speech situations in which second language learners would reasonably be expected to perform in real-life personal or professional capacities. Once such specifications were available, it would be possible for interviewers and interviewer trainers to generate role-play descriptions thar would, in all instances, reflect the sociological parameters and functional purposes at issue in the specifications, but would cast these within the domains of topic and lexicon most relevant to a given language learner or class of learners. For example, in the "year-abroad" context previously mentioned, "complaining politely to a superior" might involve a role-play situation in which the examinee's task is to induce the interviewer-"professor" to reconsider a previously-assigned grade; in the "Peace Corps volunteer to Central America" context, an appropriate analogous situation might be that of convincing the chief village officer that the assigned storage room for seeds and other agricultural supplies is both too damp and subject to pilferage. In both of these role-play situations--as well as for any others drawn up on the basis of the specified social context/function "recipe"--common evaluative procedures could be followed and interpretation of results made, notwithstanding the different topical realizations involved in each instance.

The third and final area I would like to touch on this afternoon is that of properly representing the <u>outcome</u> of the communication, that is to say, developing and validating scoring procedures that take adequately into account important communication variables that sociolinguistic and discourse analysis

studies have begun to bring to the forefront of attention in addition to (or perhaps even in place of) the usual pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and general fluency factors traditionally at issue in evaluating interviewee performance. As indicated by Marianne Adams and David Argoff earlier today, the Foreign Service Institute has been exploring the desirability of incorporating a "communication" factor in its scoring system. The Canale and Swain (1980) model of communicative competence includes the two subcategories of "sociolinguistic competence" and "strategic competence," with the former involving the selection and use of appropriate register, tone, etc. for the particular interlocutor and situation represented; and the latter involving, among other things, the ability to properly "manage" the conversation through requests for repetition, paraphrasing, etc. as necessary to maintain and facilitate communication. The scoring descriptions for the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ALSPR) developed by Ingram and Wylie (1982; see also Ingram, 1981) include aspects of "sociolinguistic" and "strategic" competence. For example, their "level 1-minus" examinee "may make inappropriate use of sympathetic noises and gestures." At 1+ on the Ingram and Wylie scale, "simple discourse markers are used relating to closely contiguous parts of the text but extended discourse is largely a series of discrete utterances" and the examinee has "very limited register flexibility."

Although it is a reasonably straightforward task to describe in words, within a series of proposed proficiency descriptions, the sociolinguistic, strategic, and other other related aspects of spoken discourse that the authors of these descriptions consider exemplary of performance at each of the specified score levels, to establish the psychometric validity of these descriptions is a much more difficult operation. At least two fundamental requirements are at issue. First, it has to be possible for knowledgeable scorers to readily and

reliably evaluate the presence or absence of the specified behaviors on the part of the examinee. Although a fairly large number of studies have shown highly satisfactory scoring reliabilities for the "traditional" FSI global score and its "pronunciation," "structure," etc. sub-factors, the question of whether incorporating additional discourse-oriented factors into the rating process will increase or decrease scoring reliability has not yet been adequately addressed. In the absence of solid empirical information to the contrary, it might be suggested that aspects of discourse which are not attended to (at least not on a conscious level) by native speakers when they are engaged in genuine conversation in real-life settings may prove difficult to evaluate in a reliable manner. For example, the examinee's use of turn-holding fillers such as "voyons" or "vous savez" is not ordinarily an aspect of speech that would receive conscious attention by the untrained interlocutor. This being the case, it may not be possible to expect that nonspecialist raters would be able--at least without lengthy and quite possibly administratively unfeasible amounts of training in discourse analysis techniques--to consistently evaluate this or other similar technical features of the examinee's speech.

As a second caution, even if it did prove possible to carefully train interviewers to a high level of reliability in making these types of judgments, such reliability might well be purchased at the cost of lowered measurement validity, in the sense that aspects of speech production that are not inherently familiar to and readily evaluated by attentive but nonspecialist native speakers (i.e., "interlocutors-in-the-street") may not be those aspects that in fact "make a difference" in the quality and effectiveness of real-life communication in ordinary speech situations.

Witnin the past few years, numerous studies of native-speaker reactions to non-native speech have appeared in the literature, and these form an

informational corpus of great potential relevance to further development of interviewing procedures and scoring techniques. For example, Burt (1975) conducted an experimental investigation in which naïve native speakers of English (e.g., storekeepers) were asked to listen to sentences containing typical errors made by non-native speakers of English and, in each instance, to indicate whether the sentence was "comprehensible." The results indicated that, in general, errors involving distortions at the sentence level (for example, incorrect word order) severely hindered comprehension, while more "local" errors such as omission of articles or verbal auxiliaries (e.g., "Why [do] we like...?") had little effect on comprehensibility. Chastain (1980), in a study based on written texts but potentially extrapolatable to speaking performance, found that native speakers of Spanish were much more tolerant of "grammatical" errors, (for example, use of incorrect gender for definite or indefinite articles) than they were of "meaning-affecting" errors such as use of incorrect or inappropriate lexicon. Affective considerations also appear to play an appreciable role in native speaker reception of nonnative communication attempts, as indicated in a study by Galloway (1980), in which videotaped samples of highly deficient Spanish, spoken by students who were nonetheless "[exerting] effort in expressing themselves," were judged quite favorably by comparison to those of students whose Spanish was technically more fluent but for whom the "desire and urgency to communicate" was less apparent. In developing and revising interview rating procedures, it would be highly desirable to take much closer account of these and other "native interlocutor" phenomena. In this regard, to attempt to closely monitor and evaluate, within the interviewing/rating process, formal aspects of speech that are not in fact of consequence to effective real-life communication insofar as naïve native listeners are concerned may be to miss the communicative forest for the analytic trees.

Where does all of this leave us with regard to the oral proficiency

interview? One might recall the image of the drinking glass filled to fifty percent capacity--for some, the glass was half full; for others, half empty. I think it is fair to say that the oral interview glass is at least half full, and perhaps appreciably more than half full, in terms of the nature and face validity of the interview process and the degree to which the interview approach can be considered congruent with the real-life communication situations it is intended to reflect. There is justifiable reason for pride on the part of those who have worked so assiduously and so effectively on making the interview process as widely known and utilized as it is today both in government and academic contexts; and the conceptual and pedagogical contributions which the widespread dissemination of the interview approach has made and will continue to make in the future are, by any measure, very large. However, these advantages not withstanding, I feel that we would, in the long run, do ourselves an appreciable disservice by contemplating only the relative fullness of the glass and by not continuing to look very closely at what might be done to fill the glass to the brim; that is, to continue to increase the validity and utility of interview-based testing even beyond its present state. Such an opportunity is certainly very much before us at this time.

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